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IS THE UNITED STATES PREPARED FOR ITS MOST LIKELY CONFLICTS? (U)  
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Bruce F. Powers

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IS THE UNITED STATES PREPARED FOR ITS MOST LIKELY CONFLICTS?

Bruce F. Powers

The Rand Corporation - Washington

It is May 1986 . . .

Libya is actively supporting a rebellious faction in a neighboring country; a Libyan leader makes a bellicose speech that includes ambiguous threats to employ a nuclear weapon. Although several sources report that Libya may have nuclear weapons stored on its soil, details conflict. Some countries refuse to believe it. Egypt is tense.

European powers are supporting the established government in the neighboring country with airlifts of military supplies. When the French increase their airlift in response to Libya's bellicosity, Libya sends fighters off the Tunisian coast to force the French aircraft to alter their flight paths. While looking for French supply planes, the Libyan planes come too close to airliners over the Mediterranean. U.S. fighters from an aircraft carrier investigate and the Libyan pilots, misinterpreting this to be a prelude to an attack on them, force two passenger airliners to accompany them in order to frustrate easy U.S. air-to-air missile shots. Over the Libyan mainland, one airliner crashes. The Libyan fighter pilots panic and force the other airliner to land in Libya. Its passengers include Americans, Egyptians and Frenchmen.

Libya refuses all international attempts to investigate the crash and announces that the surviving passengers will be held "for a few days" until the European airlift has ceased. This behavior enrages most of the world, including several African countries. The countries that are consulted do not object to a joint American/French effort to rescue the passengers. In the midst of hurried planning for the rescue, the United States learns that Egypt plans to use this incident as a pretext to destroy Libya's purported nuclear weapons in their storage site. U.S. alarm at this prospect is compounded when Nigeria announces that it will not tolerate an Egyptian strike because of uncertain fallout effects in Africa. Nigeria threatens to cut off oil to the United States if it supports Egypt's strike. Egypt says the weapons must be eliminated as a threat. Nigeria finally agrees to the weapons' neutralization, but insists on seeing the weapons afterward.

The United States decides U.S. forces must go into Libya and bring out the weapons intact. Egypt relents but France insists on a military role. The United States asks France to rescue the passengers in coordination with the U.S. mission. The French agree. Egypt provides staging bases for the American and French forces.

While privately supporting the French/American assault, other European nations publicly express a hands-off policy in the hope of assuring their continued access to Libyan oil. To this end, they privately request that the French and Americans refrain from inflicting damage that would jeopardize the access, including such damage as post-assault retaliation against Libya.

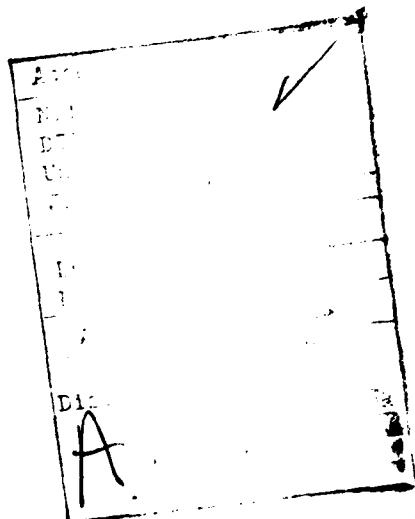
To accommodate these requests, the American and French governments set very limited tactical goals. The U.S. forces will do nothing more than bring out the suspected nuclear weapons--intact if at all possible. The French forces will rescue the surviving passengers. All collateral damage is to be minimized. Both recovery teams expect to be able to act swiftly enough at their lightly-defended objective sites to forestall overland augmentation of the sites by Libyan forces. Interference from Libyan aircraft is another matter; all airfields operating Libyan aircraft are to be neutralized temporarily. The neutralization is scheduled to last 24 hours. Afterward, the airfields will be fully operational.

The weight and volume of material to be extracted by the Americans is too great for helicopter lift. Because the weapon storage site is 15 miles from the nearest airfield that can operate U.S. cargo aircraft, that airfield is scheduled to be seized as the site is seized. U.S. assault troops are to arrive by helicopter. Trucks to transfer material from the site to the planes are to arrive at the airfield in U.S. cargo planes. The helicopters and trucks are to be left behind when the cargo planes depart with the troops and extracted material.

Two hours before the operation begins, the U.S. ambassador in Moscow outlines the plan for the Soviets, stressing its limited objectives. He insists that Soviet ships in the Mediterranean take no threatening action but invites Soviet electronic surveillance of the operation as it progresses.

Both the American and French presidents want to know what the forces in Libya are doing step by step, so that they can keep an anxious world informed. To achieve that and to insure that their forces act simultaneously, the two presidents set up continuous communications between themselves and with their forces.

With the links established, the operation begins . . .



### INTRODUCTION

Each nation tries to field fighting forces that match its perception of its future conflicts. Such perceptions are often influenced by the past, the United States being no exception. Since World War II, it has maintained large-scale forces designed to operate as even larger U.S. forces successfully did then. These forces are designed to operate:

- o For long periods at overseas distances from the United States
- o Against various opponents
  - With most forces structured for a war of attrition centered on continental Europe.
  - With smaller but substantial lighter forces able to respond quickly as needs arise in disparate global locations and best prepared to deal with opponents less sophisticated than those expected in Central Europe.

Maintaining such a mix of forces entails a major commitment; the annual U.S. budget for general purpose forces exceeds \$100 billion, more than half of the DoD budget.

Although the United States maintains both heavy and light forces, emphasis on the types of forces needed has shifted over time. U.S. policy during the early years of the Carter Administration stressed NATO readiness in Europe. However, events in Iran and Afghanistan focused attention in 1980 on the more mobile lighter forces. As a result, many such units--along with a few heavier units--were earmarked for the Rapid Deployment Force.

But does the United States have the right mix of fighting forces? The appropriate mix includes forces well-matched to conflicts that must be deterred and forces designed to deal with a range of less-well-defined conflicts. The mix can be skewed so as to mismatch some important conflicts the United States faces. If the types of conflicts facing the United States increasingly diverge from those of World War II and if the force structure continues to use World War II as

its model, apparent U.S. power may be difficult to translate into needed capabilities in practice. Are U.S. forces less and less likely to be prepared?

Preparedness may be the key to avoiding combat situations. For some of them, well-matched forces can help to prevent the outbreak of combat. For example, U.S. readiness since WWII for fighting that begins in Europe has probably helped the world to prevent it; a temporary lapse in post-WWII U.S. readiness may have contributed to the outbreak of the Korean War. The lack of U.S. preparation for the type of combat it later encountered in Southeast Asia prolonged--even if it did not engender--that conflict.

U.S. participation in Korea and Vietnam was called "limited" war to contrast it with the wider scale of the World Wars and to make clear that U.S. objectives were more limited. However, below those limited wars lies a subclass of combat operations which may be called "very limited" combat, reducing the scale and objectives even more. These operations include the Berlin airlift, the Mayaguez incident, the 1973 resupply of Israel, and the attempted rescue of the U.S. embassy hostages in Teheran. Such limited combat requires fewer and sometimes different U.S. forces. Those kinds of crises usually are assumed to be covered by forces originally introduced into the inventory for larger conflicts. Some crises may be covered; others may not, particularly when they include economic conflict along with a military clash. Even those crises that appear to be covered may demand altered capabilities of the forces maintained for larger conflicts. Although preparedness for larger conflicts must of necessity be maintained, force planning may have to increase the stress placed on very limited conflicts.

This paper assesses key trends which could result in more frequent "very limited" conflicts. Still other trends concerning how U.S. force might best be used in such conflicts are identified. The paper's objective is to raise questions about what future U.S. forces should be able to do in such conflicts, and to stimulate debate by suggesting some characteristics which those forces will need.

TRENDS THAT MAY AFFECT FORCE DESIGN

Although the United States has a long history of disagreements with other nations, disputes have occurred most often in this century as the United States has developed global interests. Many disputes have led to the threat of U.S. force, but actual fighting has been rare: the combat use of U.S. military forces has been and will continue to be viewed as a last resort. However, this paper assumes that the United States must be ready to call its forces into action in certain critical cases. To help identify the types of forces that most likely will see combat, key economic, political, and military trends are first assessed.\* These trends provide some insight into what types of conflicts are most likely to arise, whether their frequency is apt to change, and what would be required of U.S. forces in such conflicts.

Economic Trends

- o The growing number of nations in the world are increasingly interdependent economically. Greater volumes of raw materials and finished goods move among nations, often over transoceanic distances. The stability of that flow vitally affects U.S. prices and standards of living. Because disruptions to the flow can now occur at more, and more varied, places, forces are more likely to be called upon to protect or restore the flow. And yet, because further disruptions are to be avoided while restoring the flow, forces must be strictly controlled and precisely applied.
- o Heavy industries are moving outside the industrial democracies. In the last decade, more than 90 percent of new basic industrial capacity such as steel and aluminum plants has been built outside the United States.\*\* Since the United States will continue to rely on the output of these plants, forces may sometimes have to be used to insure access to it. If military forces are used in that way, they will have to be

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\*I am indebted to Rand colleagues Guy Pauker and Brian Jenkins for some of them.

\*\*David Stockman, "Let Chrysler Go Bankrupt,"  
Washington Post, 9 December 1979.

used with an eye to keeping the output of the plants high.

- o The once-preeminent U.S. economic position in the world is decaying. Several other nations have become competitive in many markets. Prices in Chicago are increasingly affected by decisions in Tokyo and Paris. (A third of U.S. grain and half of its commercial jet production are sold overseas. In addition to importing almost half of the oil it consumes, the United States relies on overseas suppliers for many key minerals. For example, all diamonds, 98 percent of manganese and 90 percent of cobalt are imported,\* mostly from the Southern Hemisphere.) Whereas the threat to use economic power once helped permit the U.S. to prevail in a dispute, it is diminishing in potency and its side-effects are becoming less predictable. It may be necessary for the United States to find new ways to combine its military power with its economic power.
- o Localized combat that runs on or spills over to additional countries can now be more damaging to U.S. interests than it once was. A prime U.S. objective will often be to limit combat in geography or time. That objective puts a premium on speed and on responsiveness to commands.
- o Because of the shift toward increasing U.S. dependence on overseas developments, economic disruptions will lead more quickly to deprivations among some segments of the U.S. populace, producing pressure for prompt corrective action. Because actions short of military attack on the increasingly interdependent economic flow can be as disruptive as attacks, future U.S. military operations may not be limited to reactions to military actions by others. U.S. forces might sometimes be used preemptively, or for coercion.

As U.S. economic power declines relative to other nations, the resultant vulnerabilities are aggravated by other trends.

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<sup>\*</sup>"More Than Just Oil in Short Supply Here," U.S. News and World Report, 21 April 1980.

Political Trends

- o The inter-European rivalries of the colonial era have been replaced by horizontal disputes (for example, the industrial democracies vs. OPEC or vs. the non-aligned nations). This suggests that shortages and cutoffs may arise at more than one place when they arise. If U.S. forces then come to be used, they may have to operate at multiple points simultaneously.
- o Military power is diffusing in the world. Because of this, small groups are exerting more influence over large nations than they once could. High technology weapons--man-portable surface-to-air missiles, for example--are increasingly available to relatively unsophisticated nations and even sub-national groups. Blunting the effects of such weapons while minimizing collateral damage imposes special requirements on U.S. forces. Furthermore, disputes leading to use of U.S. forces may pit those forces more often against opponents with limited cohesion and logistical support.
- o In the developing world, population growth may be outstripping both the resources and the management skills needed to support the larger populations. Some nations (e.g., India) seem to be coping with population pressures. Nevertheless, mass migrations and other disruptions resulting from famines and political changes appear more likely. Some migrations will be uncontrolled by any government; others may even be fostered. U.S. forces could be called upon to assist, channel, or even retard a particular migration.
- o The access to foreign markets that helps keep U.S. living standards among the world's highest results in many Americans abroad. Terrorists seeking publicity for their grievances are thus given more opportunities. As a result, the numbers of businessmen, diplomats, and other Americans seized overseas are rising. Although protecting citizens at home from physical harm by foreign enemies

remains the principal goal of U.S. defense policy, providing a measure of protection to those overseas is also important.

- o Support for military actions initially perceived by the American public as necessary but probably brief will generally decline as the length and cost of the involvement increases. Increasingly, confidence that action will be swift and effective will be a prerequisite to the use of forces.
- o The increasing economic interdependence among Western allies is apparently being countered by a trend of increasing rifts. As the number of issues of joint importance goes up, the likelihood of disagreement increases as well--particularly on matters that are unlikely to lead to major war. As a result, improvisation in alliances is increasing. As views vary about the importance of particular contingencies (for example, Afghanistan and Vietnam), the set of nations willing to act in concert with the United States will vary. In future contingencies, Allied willingness to act may become clear only at the last minute; thus, participating U.S. forces may require last-minute tailoring. For similar reasons, and with like consequences for U.S. force planning, indigenous powers may choose to participate only at the last minute.

#### Military Trends

Military considerations range from relations between the superpowers through U.S. relations with its allies to terrorism.

- o By most observers' estimates, the Soviet Union has achieved parity with the United States in intercontinental nuclear capability. Both sides remain exceedingly reluctant to employ these capabilities.
- o The superpowers have been learning that the risks of direct confrontation with each other are lowered when they become

involved in disputes outside the industrialized world.

As the superpowers perceive the consequences of fighting to be reduced, the likelihood increases that fighting will be employed as a means to resolve disputes. For example, the Soviet Union is showing an increasing propensity to use its naval forces far from the Soviet homeland.

- o Powerful states are expected to act with restraint. (The international community's tolerance for the recent behavior of Iranian revolutionaries is greater than for large-scale U.S. military counteraction against Iran.)
- o The definition of winning is less clear than it was in the World Wars. Massive destruction of an opponent's physical resources is not always a principal objective in using military forces. Taking enemy territory may not be the only way to achieve political objectives. Increasingly, the ends are linked to the means; for example, the reason for seizing an oilfield or raw material loading point would most often be to keep it operating rather than to prevent enemy access to it as in former wars.
- o The growing costs and risks of wars between nations are discouraging open military contests and encouraging less direct activities such as support of terrorists. The implication for U.S. forces is that improved rescue and neutralization capabilities will be required.
- o Terrorists are not as constrained in their activities as nations because governments seek to preserve order and predictability in world interactions. U.S. counter-terrorist forces will have to be effective but circumspect.
- o In cases of seizure of U.S. citizens, public pressure to use force quickly will be strong when the hostages appear to be in danger of physical harm. If top U.S. decisionmakers choose to respond, and with force, participating military units will have to be ready for quick and effective action.

- o The decision to commit U.S. forces to combat may be preceded by prolonged debate involving more (and more competing) viewpoints. Should U.S. forces arrive in the combat vicinity before a commitment decision has been made, the forces may be required to remain in high readiness for many weeks.

#### Summary of Trends

Preserving international economic order and protecting U.S. citizens overseas may at times call for employment of U.S. forces. Although the United States will continue striving to avert involvement in conflicts that could lead to use of its intercontinental nuclear capability, lesser demands for its forces will undoubtedly arise. As third world complexities threaten the stability of modern international industrial society, military involvement must be deft and measured to avoid making the cure worse than the disease. More varied and subtle forms of the military hand will be required than just a fist. Control of participating forces will be very close.\* (Communications tools are available to permit top U.S. decisionmakers to talk directly with on-scene commanders of distant U.S. military operations.) Tight control can help to avoid escalation or extension of involvement as revolutions, border wars, ethnic conflicts, kidnappings, and proxy wars become the most common symptoms of international tensions.

These trends intertwine in complex ways. Their relative importance is debatable, and so their net effect is far from clear. However, increased frequency of very limited conflicts looks probable, and their impacts on the capabilities required of U.S. forces can be outlined. The kinds of forces that appear best suited to respond to these trends are discussed below.

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\*Directives to U.S. forces are apt to be coordinated with negotiations as occurred during U.S. bombing of North Vietnam. Although the Vietnam War showed an extended campaign of coordination to be ineffective, employment of such coordination in crises and early in campaigns is apt to increase.

DESIGN OF FORCES

To deal with a particular incident, a relatively small combat force may be sufficient. However, since the course of an incident will seldom be clear at first, a larger force with varied capabilities may have to be sent to the vicinity. Sometimes, a larger force may forestall activities by the intervention forces of other powers. At other times, U.S. ability to forestall may depend on whether U.S. tactical objectives can be achieved within time constraints announced to the other powers beforehand. Using U.S. forces whose behavior can be observed readily by other powers may thus also be necessary. Such U.S. intervention may unavoidably occur under the scrutiny of the news media, which themselves are increasingly able to mass their collection resources.

The capabilities\* that distinguish limited combat forces from present forces designed for larger-scale combat are as follows:

- o High speed to permit rapid intervention in a situation whose rate of deterioration may itself be the immediate stimulus to use U.S. forces.
- o Enough self-sufficiency to save time ordinarily spent setting up a logistics tail. The ability to stage from improvised advanced bases and to operate in different places and under varying circumstances.
- o Enhanced communications (among units in the force and with higher headquarters) to make the force better-coordinated and highly responsive to direction by political authority.
- o Specially trained personnel and equipment to repair damage, clear debris, and possibly operate industrial and other facilities for a time.
- o The ability to incapacitate selected enemy forces temporarily to permit friendly operations to proceed unhampered.

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\*This outline of capabilities presumes a precision that does not attend actual combat, but nonetheless serves as a useful basis for force planning.

Discussion with Rand colleagues Carl Builder and Bill Hutzler sharpened the description of capabilities.

- o Extensive accompanying surveillance of the objective and nearby areas.\*
- o Higher average readiness, and the ability to bring readiness to a peak very quickly.
- o The ability to turn action on and off over long periods, particularly when U.S. forces are used in concert with coercive economic measures.
- o The ability to withdraw rapidly, with wholesale jettisoning of equipment when necessary.
- o Features and activities that permit observers, such as pre-belligerent powers and the press, to follow U.S. progress.
- o The ability to tailor the mix of participating U.S. units at the last minute. This capability will be needed both to limit the size of the U.S. force that achieves contact and to permit concerted action with allied forces.

Besides those desired capabilities, other criteria, such as locations, manning, and the adaptability of other U.S. forces, affect the design of forces for very limited military operations.

Regarding locations, less-developed parts of the world may have fewer airfields, poorer roads, weaker indigenous communications, and more congested and ramshackle cities than in Europe. Such locations often will be warmer. In addition, as the U.S. focuses more on sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian Ocean littoral, the average distance between present U.S. bases and likely combat areas grows.

Regarding manning, the U.S. tradition of citizens-serving-temporarily-as-soldiers began with fighting near home in North America. That tradition--which results in fighting forces comprised of large numbers of relatively inexperienced troops--was extended overseas in the present century when American forces operated in European and Asian theaters during the World Wars. Such impromptu training may still be appropriate for the defense of Europe, but

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\*For example, should the United States impose a blockade, U.S. military forces must rapidly and precisely gather identification information on potential blockade-runners to maximize the time available to U.S. political leaders in selecting courses of action.

low-level conflicts are apt to call for more experienced soldiers. The range of skills called for from such experienced troops, even young ones, may require higher pay and improved and specialized training.

Regarding force adaptability, although all U.S. general purpose forces are deployable, some are more mobile than others. In Vietnam, the United States initially used its highly mobile forces. Later, it added forces designed for Europe and sustained all of them 10,000 miles overseas for years. In the same way, forces designed for Europe or for limited wars may be able to cover very limited combat. But forces so used may be of only limited effectiveness. The principal issue raised in this paper is whether specially-structured forces are needed for "very limited" combat.

#### EXAMPLES

To try to illuminate that issue further, two examples follow of future very limited combat situations besides the one that opened this paper. As with the opening one, a pessimistic viewpoint pervades these examples.

Panamanian revolutionaries seize a 3-mile portion of the canal that includes locks. When the United States shows support for the Panamanian government, the revolutionaries begin to destroy support buildings at the lock sites.

The Panamanian government requests U.S. help in recovering control of the canal and asks that damage to it be minimized. Most Latin American countries reluctantly agree to U.S. intervention, but insist on minimum damage to the canal.

Despite attempts to limit it, severe damage occurs as the revolutionaries are driven off. The United States decides it must accomplish repairs, but the area remains very dangerous while mop-up of the guerrilla forces occurs. The United States faces the choice of using military forces for repair or providing cover for hastily-drafted civilian repair crews.

Mop-up goes slowly; surviving guerrillas direct occasional sniping attacks at Panamanian canal operators when shipping finally resumes. The Panamanians refuse to work in the face of such a threat. U.S. forces are obliged to operate the canal until other arrangements can be made.

Racial war breaks out in southern Africa. Reports of atrocities against Europeans are matched by reports of harsh enforcement by South African authorities of restrictions designed to keep blacks in compounds.

Surviving Europeans and mistreated blacks both request help from the Northern Hemisphere. Hurried discussions produce a consensus that quick physical separation of the races would be best. The United States agrees to use most of MAC and some amphibious ships to help achieve the separation. An effective series of radio broadcasts to southern Africa on the American role is begun.

During the ensuing lift, the South African government falls without immediate replacement. Marauding bands of whites begin moving about South Africa. Reliable communications within the black compounds break down, and hundreds of thousands of blacks begin disorderly movement toward Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania.

Foreseeing overwhelming settlement problems, the governments of those countries urgently appeal for help in channeling the refugees elsewhere. Several other central African countries agree to receive refugees, but have no means to get them there. U.S. lift forces are requested to divert their effort to this longer-distance resettlement from southern Africa. They begin to do so, but this time are not preceded by a radio information campaign. Some scuffles occur between U.S. MPs and refugees at airheads when rumors sweep through the refugees about what the longer-distance flights mean. Reports of these scuffles get magnified and added to the rumors about long-distance flights. Small numbers of black dissidents overreact and fire a few stored infrared surface-to-air missiles at MAC aircraft. Intelligence reveals that the number of missiles potentially held by refugees is limited to about 50, dispersed to four storage locations at last report.

U.S. public opinion is ambivalent. Most Americans believe the airlift of refugees must go on, but most also want the dissidents disarmed. The U.S. president reluctantly decides to use U.S. forces to disarm them, but issues orders that harm to the dissidents is to be absolutely minimized. The disarming is to be done urgently to permit the now-diminished refugee lift to proceed unfettered. Because of uncertainty about whether the surface-to-air missiles are being moved as refugees continue northward on the ground, U.S. disarming teams must rapidly gather information from moving refugees on the whereabouts of missiles. When missiles are localized, the disarming must be done without adding to the sense of panic among refugees.